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ABSTRACT

This study, part of a larger project on doctoral student attrition, presents an in-depth account of the educational experiences of three doctoral students who dropped out. The students, a woman in sociology who left after the first year, a man in psychology who completed all but a dissertation, and a woman in Art History who left after four years of study, were interviewed for an hour. In presenting and analyzing the interviews the study examined chronological descriptions of the graduate school career, and key issues in each student's experience selected for their richness and centrality with a particular focus on the role of departmental context. Four interpretive themes emerged from the narratives: (1) in contrast to current views that see some aspects of attrition as a healthy sorting process, the participants' stories suggested that they had proved their abilities and might have persisted with active intervention from the department; (2) students shared an implicit expectation of a caring advisor and a nurturing community and when they did not experience it they felt deprived and alienated; (3) all three students prevaricated in telling their departments why they were leaving; and (4) all three stories showed a dynamic interplay of structure and agency as each person negotiated organizational structures and their own motives. (Contains 30 references.) (JB)

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Student Descriptions of the Doctoral Student Attrition Process

by Chris M. Golde
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Presented at the 19th annual meeting of the
Association for the Study of Higher Education
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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Doubletree Hotel, Tucson, Arizona, November 10-13, 1994. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

One primary function of the American research university is the training of future faculty and researchers through the doctoral education process. Therefore, universities have a vested interest in the outcomes of doctoral education, as well as in understanding the circumstances under which those outcomes fail to be realized. However, compared with undergraduates, doctoral students are an understudied segment of the university population. While a number of commissions periodically study the "state" of graduate education (e.g., Breneman, 1975; Smith, 1985), little is understood about the process of achieving a doctoral degree. There are few scholarly descriptions of doctoral students and doctoral education.

One aspect of doctoral education that is often deplored but little studied is the high level of student attrition. Graduate and doctoral student attrition rates are rarely published. "The practice has been (for understandable reasons) to concentrate on those students who actually earn doctorates, allowing those who drop out to disappear from sight." (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992, p. 107) When these rates have been calculated, the average levels of doctoral attrition are consistently estimated to be 40% (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).

Most of the research on doctoral student attrition has focused on individual student characteristics in an effort to determine which students are more likely to complete their degrees. Some consistent findings include the following. White students have lower attrition rates (Naylor & Sanford, 1982; Tucker, Gottlieb, & Pease, 1964; Zwick, 1991) than minority students. Men have lower attrition rates than women (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1990; Cook & Swanson, 1978; Gillingham, Seneca, & Taussig, 1991; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Lemp, 1980; Naylor & Sanford, 1982; Stark, 1966). Attrition rates differ markedly by disciplinary area. The natural sciences have the lowest rates, followed by the social sciences, and the humanities, which have the highest rates of attrition (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Mooney, 1968; Rosenhaupt, 1958; Tucker et al., 1964; Wright, 1964). Research based on institutional data has also pointed out the role of levels and types of financial support in student success (Cook & Swanson, 1978; Rosenhaupt, 1958; Stark, 1966; Wilson, 1965).

Surveys have also contributed to the profile of the successful doctoral student: a strong commitment to completion and personal persistence are critical to success (Clewell, 1987; Dolph, 1983; Long, 1987; Renetzky, 1966; Weil, 1989). Surveys and interviews have also pointed to the importance of faculty relationships to students (Berg & Ferber, 1983; Dolph, 1983; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Renetzky, 1966; Tucker et al., 1964; Weil, 1989).

Notwithstanding the importance of these findings, this previous research suffers from some conceptual weaknesses. There are four specific gaps which my research attempts to fill.

First, the role of institutional or structural barriers to success have been minimized, in favor of research on individual attributes. One reason for this individualistic focus is that many studies have focused on student persistence and success, rather than looking at student attrition. The persistence perspective puts the onus for achievement on the student, and obscures institutional or structural barriers to success. Easy access to data from student records may also explain this emphasis.

Second, the processes by which organizational or individual factors interact have not been investigated. Rather than focusing solely on individual characteristics of students, or particular organizational policies, there is a need to understand how all of these factors link together to form the individual student's experience.

Third, the voices of students are noticeably absent. Without talking to students, the complex nature of the attrition process will remain hidden. Of four research projects on doctoral student progress which have employed interviews (Clewell, 1987; Office of the President - University of California, 1990; Renetzky, 1966; Wright, 1964), only one reported the words of the students interviewed. Renetzky employed the strategy of selecting quotations to illustrate the analytic point in question. This serves to provide corroborating evidence, but does not allow the reader to see the student's experience in its entirety.[1]

Fourth, because many of the investigations have been purely quantitative in nature, they have conceptualize attrition as a solitary event, rather than the consequence of a dynamic process. Students are a success or a failure; they have either completed the degree or attrited. The reality, particularly for doctoral students, would appear to be more complex than a simple decision to complete or drop out. While the university may impose a fixed set of enrollment categories on them, students may hold a more complex understanding of the process of their education in their own minds.

METHODS

The research presented here is part of a larger project on doctoral student attrition. The goal of this study was to begin to fill the conceptual gaps described above by examining the entirety of a student's description of the doctoral education process, in all its complexity, and by focusing on the departmental context of students' experiences. For this research project I conducted ten interviews with students who self-identified as

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[1] Cornell's (1989) first person account of dropping out of an English department stands in contrast to this research. However, hers is not embedded in any analytic or conceptual framework.

having dropped out of their doctoral program. There were three male and seven female informants, who had attended six different universities, in seven different departments. The interviews, approximately an hour in length, covered the topic of why the student dropped out of their doctoral program.[2]

The goal of this paper is to present the accounts of three students in great depth, because I believe that the voices of graduate students are very rarely heard. In most venues the people who are in Ph.D. programs at leading universities are competent and efficacious. Nonetheless, in the context of the university, they are relatively voiceless, stemming from their powerless, dependent position. Doctoral students meet the criteria of people "who have not been heard because their points of view are believed to be unimportant or difficult to access by those in power." (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993, p. 10)

The students' narrative accounts are followed by an interpretive section, in which the key insights I draw from the stories are presented. The three students featured in this paper were selected in order to provide contrast with each other. Readers are invited to make their own analysis of the similarities and differences between the students.

The narrative accounts presented here are only a selection of the entire interview, although they are presented with the goal of providing the reader a clear portrait of the person as I came to understand them.[3] The names of the informants, of institutions, of faculty, and of university offices have been changed in order to reduce the possibility that the university or the student would be identified. The names of the disciplines have been preserved, in order to provide additional contextual information to the reader. However, in some cases, the names of disciplinary subspecialties have been changed, so that departments will be less easily recognized.[4]

The accounts begin with a brief summary of the students overall experience and reasons for withdrawing. This is followed by a lengthy, chronological description of the students' graduate school career. These chronologies are followed by two sections which

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[2] The protocol asked the student to tell, in roughly chronological order, the story of their experience in graduate school, beginning with their applications and initial expectations. The interview then proceeded to questions focusing on various aspects of the graduate school experience, such as classes and the advisor-advisee relationship. The interview concluded by asking them to assess their overall experience.

[3] Obviously, it is impossible to present the reader an unmediated glimpse of the informant. In selecting the questions to ask, the quotations to include here, and by rearranging quotes, I have inserted my own interpretation into the process.

[4] In general, when the informant spoke ungrammatically, I did not correct them. The notations I use are:
.. indicates where a drop phrase such as "Well, I guess", "and just" or "I was like" was deleted for readability.
.... indicates where at least a sentence removed, or when the order has been rearranged.
[] is used to either clarify the reference, or to replace a specific name with a generic, such as [undergraduate institution].
Bold text indicates emphasis on the part of the speaker.

illuminate in greater depth some of the key issues in each students' experience. They were selected for their richness and for their centrality. In particular, I am focusing on the role of departmental context. Thus each student's description of the salient aspect of the departmental context as they experienced it are included.

THE CASES

Case #1: Sally

Summary

Sally was a high-achieving undergraduate, who entered a doctoral program straight out of college. Sally arrived at Midwestern University full of expectations for a research-faculty career. She had had her pick of several graduate programs and elected to study in Midwestern's sociology department. Early in her first quarter she had an upsetting altercation with her advisor. As the year progressed, she did not make a meaningful intellectual connection with any faculty member, and at the end of her first year, she withdrew. However, a summer job rekindled a love for research, and after two years working, she is now beginning another doctoral program at another university.

Chronological Description of Graduate School Career

When I ask for her chronological story, Sally begins by discussing her expectations of graduate school.

> My expectations were just incredibly high. And I knew nothing. .. I thought I was going into a field where there weren't any politics, where I could just do what I wanted, and my work would just be evaluated on the basis of its, you know [merit.] So it was a big huge shock to me when I started school.

Sally describes being "miserable" the first quarter. When she approached several faculty members for help in turning her undergraduate honors thesis into a publication, she received no help. One professor told her "that was all in the past, and I should move on." Another steered her to Jim Smith, a professor in another department, for technical help. Their interaction underscored the alienation she felt in her own department.

> I was **so** unhappy, it was a month and a half into the quarter, more than halfway through the quarter, I walked into Jim's office, and he said "Well how are you doing?" and I burst into tears. He is the only person who ever asked me the entire year how I was doing. None of the faculty, [they] just didn't give a shit. They didn't care what the students are doing. Some of them don't recognize me! I have been in the department and they don't know who I am.

One memorable event in her first quarter was a conversation with her advisor, who suggested that she consider dropping out of school.

> She said that I wasn't fully engaged and that other faculty had complained to her about me, and that it was her role to let me know that I was not doing well. And I was totally floored by this. .... It was such a bad experience. It was really bad. .... She was yelling at me, and .. I was trying really hard not to cry, and

then I just left. And then I ran to [my friend] Rebecca and I burst into tears, but it was really horrible, it was really, really horrible.

Sally tried to address this problem by approaching each of her professors in turn and asking them if they perceived her as engaged. When faculty did not know what she was talking about she realized that the complaint was "just this one psycho, and that it had nothing to do with me." Sally reached the conclusion that merit was not the criteria she was being judged against. She expresses this realization:

> Then you realize that this is really political and you have to do some impression management. I have to figure out what is going on, and work on my image in the department.

During winter quarter Sally began to reassess her choice of departments. She entered therapy, and talked to "a lot of people" about whether she wanted to stay at Midwestern. Sally is clearly able to articulate her expectations, her disappointments, and the personal limits she drew around the experience. She encapsulates her conclusions:

> I think one of the main reasons I left is that I didn't think that there was anyone there that I could work with. Who I thought was nice, and who would be interested in working with me. It was more that I didn't see myself being interested in them, but I also didn't see them being nice at all. And who wants to spend 4 or 5 more years in a place where nobody is nice?

Sally left Midwestern, and worked for two years. Soon, she will enter another doctoral program, as she believes academic work is best suited to her. Sally's tone of voice warms as she describes the department she is about to enter. She will be working with several faculty she knows well. She is confident that she is familiar enough with the department and its norms to have a good experience.

> The whole reason I am back [in school] is mostly because I worked with people there, and I felt like "Well it wasn't an illusion, it wasn't just cause you liked [undergraduate advisor] and it was fun to work with him, there are things that you like to do in this field and you can do them."

Sally believes that her current situation is very rare. She contrasts her choice with the lack of information most students have when starting a degree program.

> I am glad that I knew the second time around was how important it was to have the people you thought you could work with, that were nice. You can't really know that. The problem is that you don't know what a department is like until you are in it. Visiting doesn't help. And you can talk to faculty in their offices, for an hour, and think they are very nice people, and then it turns out that they are monsters. They will say whatever it takes to get you to come there.

Telling Others about the Decision to Leave

During our interview Sally appeared to be an articulate, thoughtful person who was still angry about her experience. Because of she clearly located the responsibility for her unhappiness with the department, I wanted to probe whether, how and to whom Sally had communicated her concerns and experiences.

When Sally decided to leave her program, she had several cursory discussions about the decision with departmental faculty. The reaction she encountered reinforced her impressions of the department as uncaring of students.

> When I told them I was leaving I didn't get much, no one really asked me why. .... They kind of viewed it as "This person didn't fit in with us." .... They may have asked why, but it wasn't like "Why are you dropping out?" it was like "Oh well you didn't fit, you don't think your interests match with ours?" or "What do you think you are going to do next?" It wasn't really an inquiring "Why? Did you have any problems? What were the issues surrounding your decision?"

Now, in retrospect, Sally assigns responsibility for her decision to leave to the faculty in the department.

> I totally think it was the department and not me. And they definitely framed it as an issue of the student, something being wrong with the student for not fitting with the department.

She reflected on the fact that nearly a third of the students she entered with left at the end of the first year. With both wonder and scorn she remarked: "They never took it as a reflection on themselves that so many of us dropped out."

I asked her why these issues were not raised with faculty.

> I think it was way too dangerous. When I was leaving, I thought "What if I want to come back into the field? I can't tell Dave Unger that his department is completely without any friendly faces. That I thought nobody took an interest in me at all." I couldn't tell him that. And I think that most people felt like there was no way they could say it.

Departmental Relationships

A prominent theme in Sally's experience was the alienation and unhappiness she felt. Since these feelings seemed rooted in her experiences within her department, I wanted to understand the departmental context more clearly. For Sally, the relationships within the department were the feature she highlighted.

When Sally discusses her relationships with faculty, she often uses the term "political," and describes her motivation in strategic terms. For example, when I ask if she had considered changing advisors, after the events of the Fall term, she says she did not do so.

> I thought about switching, but then I was like "I don't want to get her mad. I don't need to get her mad, I didn't want her to take it personally. And I just wasn't going to — no rocking the boat.

When I ask her what she expected from an advisor, she broadens her response to include her expectations for all faculty.

> I am not really sure about an advisor in particular, ... but the faculty showed no interest in the students. They didn't really care what we were doing. And I don't need friends among the faculty, but it would be nice if somebody asked how you were doing. Something like that. Or when you went to ask for help on the statistics problem that they would happily give it to you and not tell you that they were busy and come back another time. .... And my advisor was willing to do that .... she was more than happy to help me talk about courses

and stuff like that. But I don't think that a lot of students in the department get a feeling of interest from the faculty.

Sally also depicts relationships among faculty in political terms. She voices disgust at the infighting among faculty, telling a complicated story in which faculty conflicts over who was allowed to vote in meetings became so heated that one senior faculty member "threw a fit" and declared he would no longer teach in the department. Sally tells the story to illustrate how the department was dysfunctional and political, remarking sarcastically that: "there are these ridiculous things that go on in that department .... it just makes me laugh".

When I ask her what kinds of students are most valued in the department, she is unable to answer the question. Once again, she frames her answer as a deficit on the part of faculty. "I don't think they value anybody. They want somebody to be their slave." She mentions a fifth year student who hadn't started her dissertation. Rather, she continues to work for her advisor. Rhetorically Sally asks: "Why isn't he trying to push her to do what she should be doing?" and " Why aren't they nurturing students and helping them?"

Sally finds one explanation for her sense of disconnection in the admissions process. A friend of Sally's was on the admissions committee, and portrayed faculty as most concerned with recruiting students with high GRE scores, rather than compatible research interests. Allegedly, faculty said: "If their interests don't match ours they will know not to come here." Sally asks: "Well how are you supposed to know?" Sally's experience describes the difficulty of being a savvy consumer. "Nobody was interested in what I was interested in, but they just wanted me to get interested in what they were interested in."

In spite of the "mean" example faculty set, Sally generally found her fellow students an unexpected source of assistance. Her cohort provided support, while older students behaved in ways that were not always pleasing.

> One of the things I was surprised about is that I liked a lot of the students in my cohort. .... I never would have survived if it wasn't for Rebecca and Lorrie and Roger. If it weren't for them I probably would have gone home. ....But .. I think for the most part it was some of the older students [who] made you feel like you weren't up to par or whatever.

Sally also describes her problems as being pandemic through the department. Using one of the theories presented in a theory class, Sally specifies her frustration:

> [I] remember Bill talking about anomie. Well I was the most anomic individual, I just couldn't believe how everyone was completely aimless. We didn't have any cohesion, any real structure, any anything. Nobody took an interest in us. .... I wasn't asking for too much. The older students would always be talking about how you are supposed to be miserable, and how everybody is miserable, and you should be miserable. And I think that is really lame.

Even more broadly, she tries to express the source of her bewilderment at this perceived inattention.

> And in some ways you would think it would be a priority for the faculty, to keep their students around, and to help them out, and to make them good sociologists or whatever they happen to be, historians, or comp lit professors. But it seems like they don't care.

Looking at the entire structure of academia, she contrasts a utopian vision with the prevailing norms.

> I really think there is this whole feeling in academia that it should be rough. It should be hard. And no graduate student should be happy. You should be poor, and you should slave. .... But I really think it doesn't have to be that way. There have to be ways to get through to people on this issue. I think that once people become faculty members they have too many other things on their minds, they just don't care.

Case #2: Nathan

Summary

Nathan finished his undergraduate degree, got married in the summer, and immediately began the doctoral psychology program at Eastern University. Initially, his goals were oriented towards academia, but quickly his interests shifted to applied research, based in industry. After three years he received a masters. Every summer students in his department are placed in internships. At the end of his fourth year, he decided to do a more substantive internship spanning a summer and a semester. He moved to California for this experience, and after the summer was offered a full-time job. He took the job, intending to complete his dissertation simultaneously. After another year, he realized that this was not feasible, and withdrew from the program. He has continued to progress in his career in Silicon Valley.

Chronological Description of Graduate School Career

Nathan applied a "very very focused" strategy to selecting his graduate institution. He applied three rational criteria to his decision: wanting a "strong program," being "picky" about where he would live, and moving to a place his wife would be able to find a job. He ended up selecting Eastern for another reason as well.

> I chose Eastern because it had this mystical appeal about it. It was very funny. It was the smallest of the programs, it was probably not the highest regarded of the programs, but it had this mystical appeal of being in [state], and had this reputation of being this really, really good university. They were anxious to have me come there, gave me a nice fat stipend, and all of those good things. So I was very excited about the program.

Nathan found the first year of school academically challenging; "it was far from fun" he recalled. He describes the initial strategy as "semi-hidden agenda" of "weeding out."

> You only find out after you get there, that Eastern deliberately created the program such that a certain percentage of the students will leave after the first year. It was very, very, very hard. .... We all saw that weeding out process.

For example, of the five students Nathan counted in his cohort, only two ultimately received their doctorates. He depicts the "high expectations" faculty had as resulting in the mind set that "we make the program very, very hard, and if you can't cut it, you don't belong in this program." In Nathan's opinion "they are very tough on people, and I don't know that that is necessarily a good thing."

In addition to classes, Nathan was paired with his advisor, in order to begin a research program. Although he had selected his advisor based on mutual intellectual interests, he was soon disappointed.

> I found out I didn't particularly like him, nor did I particularly like the way he worked .. and I somewhat quickly became a little disenchanted with what I had chosen to do.

Part way through his first year, Nathan "just fell in love" with a new line of research. A prospective faculty member was giving a talk on human-computer interaction, and he decided to focus on this work for his dissertation. For strategic reasons, Nathan opted to get a masters in his first field, while simultaneously beginning to move into this new area. Most of the students in his program also chose to pursue a masters on the way to the Ph.D. as a strategy for dealing with the uncertain nature of the department.

> Almost everyone I can recall did get their masters. .... The lore of the students was it is .. safety to get it. .... It was a prudent step to get your masters because you will never know what will happen down the line. As was the case with me.

Nathan's second year was marked by a continued focus on course work, and development of the masters thesis. He was absorbed by the intellectual challenges he faced. Nathan made another change at this time, deciding he did not want an academic career, an interest sparked by the work he was doing with his new advisor.

> I decided I didn't want to be an academic, I want to go into industry. I was making these radical changes. I started working with this other professor .. and we started doing consulting research projects. I have to admit that I became a little enamored of the fact that I quickly became the highest paid graduate student in the department. Because .. I was being paid by a major software company .... it was really lucrative, it went over really well, we got papers out of it .. and I was completely sucked into this, and I loved it, I really loved it.

In pursuit of this new focus, Nathan had switched advisors. Nathan's relationship with his second advisor was one of the most appealing aspects of these years. Not only did their intellectual interests match, but they made a strong personal bond. Nathan describes him in glowing terms:

> He was laid back, casual .... He was a typical graduate-student-who-never-stopped-being-a-graduate-student type of professor .... graduate students came over and worked at his house .... he was a typical really cool advisor.

> And very smart. .... I have never met anyone who had him as an advisor who really didn't like him and form a good relationship with him. .... He formed a personal relationship with his students.

Nathan draws comparisons between his first and second advisor, as a way of describing the value he placed on the relational component of graduate school.

> [My second advisor] knew you, he knew what your life was about, you spent time with him doing things, whether it was working late into the evening, or having dinner, ... he broke down the faculty-student wall. .... It yields to the graduate student a greater sense of accomplishment if they are treated as more of a peer, a junior peer, but a peer. .... My first advisor kept that wall up. I was a student-person. He had his life, I had mine. He would give me direction and we would meet, and that was it. Whereas my second advisor was someone who became someone who I would consider not only my mentor, my advisor, but somewhat of my friend, who understood what was important to me and would spend time with me discussing not only .. my dissertation .. but discussing what I wanted to do, what was happening .. in the industry ....I liked him much better as a person. .... He has a good relationship with everyone of his students because of that. I don't know many people that have as good a relationship with some of the other faculty members there. ....Work and school is more than just producing some product, it is about forming relationships with people. And I valued that when I got it from my second advisor.

After three years, Nathan received his M.A., timing which he describes as "about right." His academic career was passing relatively trouble free. By his fourth year, Nathan made some concrete plans to pursue his love of "research that has a practical application." He made arrangements to do an extended internship with an alumnus of his program, who was department head in a Silicon Valley company. His boss was "very in favor of my doing research on the job .. to continue my dissertation research," so Nathan planned to work through the fall, and then return to Eastern to finish his dissertation for a semester.

At first Nathan was able to "talk weekly" on the phone with his advisor. However, Nathan points to two events which reduced his ties to Eastern. First, a few months before he left for California Nathan decided to leave his wife. Second, after the summer, Nathan's boss offered him a full-time job. Matter-of-factly Nathan describes himself as "very very good at what I do." At the time Nathan was confident that he could both work and do a dissertation:

> [My boss] wanted me to finish my dissertation, but he also wanted me to work for him. I'd been having a lot of fun, being in Silicon Valley, working 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. Getting paid tons of money to do it. I said "Sure I can do this. I can work and do my dissertation and bang bang bang it will all be perfect."

Nathan's advisor reluctantly supported this new plan. They had a long talk when Nathan traveled back to Eastern to pack his remaining possessions. "He was mostly in favor of it, but he warned me that something bad may come of it." Nathan spent another year trying to simultaneously work on his career and his dissertation. While at

first he was able to keep juggling work and school, work began to take a more prominent place, because it was "fun," "interesting" and he was "pretty good at this stuff." Nevertheless, there were still pressures to work on his dissertation, both from his family and his department. Nathan recounted the process of deciding to withdraw from school:

> And I was getting pressure at the same time from my family "Are you going to finish that degree?" It was important to them. So I continued under the increasingly stronger facade of working on my dissertation stuff, when in fact I was spending less and less time working on it, and was having less and less frequent conversations with my advisor, and I was spending more and more time working on my work, ... until the point came, like a year or so after I started as a full-time employee .. that I sort of said, "Well, I am not going to finish this." .... And the department had been sending me increasingly frequent letters saying "Are you working on this?" "What are you doing?" And I am saying "Yea, yea, -- oh maybe -- no." And then I actually had to withdraw from the program. .... And they said "Well we are really sorry that happened."

Having second thoughts

One theme which threads through Nathan's interview are his feelings about his decision to leave his graduate program. His comments reveal his motivations and his options more clearly.

If not regrets, then wistful thinking seems to persist in Nathan's mind. He describes his decision to me matter-of-factly, but repeatedly, with comments like: "I am not bitter at all", "I don't feel less smart because I don't have my Ph.D." While not regretting his choice, the lack of completion rankles slightly. He explains his position like this:

> To this day, I still have people, including my [second] wife and my father, who say "do you ever think of going back and finishing your dissertation?" and I say "no" now. There is a certain part of me that would like that sense of closure. Because I like closure. But there is another part of me that sees it as an intellectual exercise, that certainly I could do, but I feel that I have done so much work that is multiple dissertations worth of work. .... I do a lot, I have been successful, I move up in the ranks, and nobody doesn't respect me because I only have a masters degree and I am ABD .... and I am pretty happy with that.

Another source of second thoughts is Nathan's competitive personality. His second wife has just graduated from college and plans to pursue a Ph.D. With candor Nathan reveals that this gives him pause:

> There is a little part of me that thinks "Well my wife is going to get a Ph.D., I wonder if I should try to keep up?" .... Up to this point I have always had more degrees, but she is catching up. .... I am a somewhat competitive person, and it does enter into my equation. .... The kids will be proud of us both. It will be fine. But all of these things are things you think about.

In retrospect Nathan recognizes that his life might be quite similar today if he had followed his original plan. But he recognizes that this wisdom only comes with hindsight.

> I probably would have been equally successful. But at the time you don't know that. You think "If I don't take this opportunity now, when will there be another equally good opportunity in the future?" You try to grab hold, when you are young and foolish .... you try to grab hold of the opportunities, and you don't think that those opportunities will be there in the future. It only comes as you are a little older and wiser.

Nathan has made his peace with his choice, which has offered him a large measure of success. When looking back on graduate school, he seems very happy with the experience. Nonetheless he is unsure how he is currently regarded by faculty.

> I am not sure if the faculty considers me a success or a failure. .... I think some of them probably consider me a success, because I have been successful in the field, and I have found opportunities both as interns and real jobs for other students coming out of the department. And some of them may consider me a failure, because I didn't finish up what I started there. And I should have done that, so I am really a failure to them.

Life at Eastern

In order to better understand the departmental context in which Nathan was trained, I probed with a variety of questions. While Nathan's decision to leave school was largely rooted in his work life, the department and university shaped Nathan's skills, interests and perception of his options for four years.

Nathan's characterizes the ideal psychology department graduate student as a person focused on academic achievement. He rattles off a list of attributes:

> [Someone] who whizzed through the classes and did well. Started research early and often. Did an internship, but didn't let it seduce them. Developed a strong tie with a faculty member and was focused. Focus, focus, focus.

Nathan describes graduate school as providing a sense of community for students, both within the department, and within the university. Perhaps this was fostered by the homogenous student body which was "very white American." The entering class was "a strong cohort" which the department took pains to integrate into the larger community.

> The department as a whole liked having graduate students around. All graduate students got office space on campus from their first year. They liked students to be on campus. .... The department had weekly Brown Bag lunches where .. everyone after their first year in the department presented a topic for the full length of a lunch. .... It was a real community and I enjoyed that a lot. ....

This sense of integration into a larger community was echoed at the university level. Students participated socially, in particular Nathan describes a graduate student bar at which "nary a year went by when there wasn't a psychology graduate student as a manager or a bartender." There was also a "strong graduate student association." He says: "There was a real sense of community over all."

When I ask what he could have done differently, Nathan draws a blank. Overall his summary is very positive.

> I had a pretty good time in graduate school. I was pretty successful, and I got a lot of benefits from it, and then I came out here and I got a job. .... I would not call it a tale of woe, by any means.

Case #3: Jane

Summary

Jane came to Atlantic University to study Art History. The daughter of an academic, she had planned to pursue a Ph.D. in this area from early in her undergraduate years. She went straight from college to a terminal Masters program. Some doubts made her delay doctoral work for four years to work in a museum. After an introspective trip to Italy, she changed her area of focus, applied to Atlantic, rejected a deferred admission to Elite University, and enrolled in 1989. Her first two years were trouble free; she enjoyed her classes and the challenges of graduate school. During the fall of her third year, her work began to shift focus, to the displeasure of her advisor. They terminated their relationship, and after a few months of inactivity, Jane found a new topic and a new advisor. However, by spring she had reevaluated her commitment to academia and Art History and decided to withdraw. She is now pursuing professional work in other arenas.

Chronological Description of Graduate School Career

Jane came to Atlantic University after turning down a deferred acceptance to Elite University. She had quit her four-year museum job and spent several months in Italy, soul searching. She met a colleague in Italy who encouraged her to apply to Atlantic. She describes setting aside her lingering ambivalent feelings in order to begin her Ph.D.

> Let me say in all honesty that I had some ambivalence about the Ph.D. before I came here, but I thought "Well, I am just going to do the degree and be a professor." I am going to do the degree because I want what is at the end of the road.

At first school exceeded her expectations. "I loved my first year and a half." Her relationships with faculty were "fun and comfortable." She enjoyed her fellow students as well, saying: "we all got along .... [It was] really was one of the best things about the program. In particular, the classes gave her new tools, which serve her well to this day. She says:

> I learned to think in a more analytical and theoretical way than I ever had. .... I don't regret it at all, because I have learned to think. And it became a part of my identity that I learned to be this pretty good thinker here. And that is big. So, I .. got some good stuff out of here.

She had had an instant connection with her advisor through a mutual friend, and he accepted her into his inner circle. Her description of the early years have an idyllic

quality. She describes their relationship as "really great at the beginning." She lists some of the qualities of this advisor which made their relationship so positive.

> He treated me wonderfully. He thought I did well, he gave me the highest grades. .... He kind of being like the guy I had as an advisor at [undergraduate institution] at the beginning. .... Just real looking-out-for-us kind of thing.

Asked for detail, she described his strengths this way:

> His strengths are, when he thinks you are going to be doing his kind of work, .. he really makes opportunities appear for you. .. Meeting pretty important area artists. Making sure there is money in the summer, that kind of thing. Really nice. And opening his files to you. It was pretty major. .. He pulls a lot of weight. And he tries to do for you.

Jane passed the initial hurdles with ease, but tensions began to emerge as she struggled to formulate a dissertation proposal, which is considered a major milestone in this department. The topic was one supplied by her advisor, and when I express interest in that development she snorts, "A big red flag should go up at that point." While the topic initially interested her, she "struggled" to write her proposal. She began to write about the artists "as women", although overall she could not see "how this would come together." Jane's advisor did not agree with her gendered analysis of the artists. Ultimately, this disagreement escalated into an altercation in his office, which she calls their "mutual falling out." She recounts this episode:

> So we had a meeting where he just basically said "I don't think you have the capacity to do this kind of work. I don't think you can actually do a dissertation." .... This is the man who was giving me A+++ .... and really developing me as a scholar, and suddenly he told me in this meeting, around August or September, he said he didn't think I was capable. .... It was horrible. And I was just sitting there going "huh?" And the reason I said it was a mutual falling out is that I at the same point was thinking "this guy is just, his mind is shut. I am not stupid. I know I can do a dissertation, it's just that he doesn't think one can think if they start doing women's stuff." Basically. So that was that.

The next two months were very difficult for Jane. She talks about her "funk" being induced not only by the argument with her advisor, but residual physical pain from a bad car accident as well as "getting dumped by a boyfriend." "It just sucked," she summarized. For two months she "sat at home and did nothing." One of the strategies Jane used to cope was to find a therapist at Psychological Services.

By January Jane began to regroup. She had been thinking about a new topic, and sought out a professor to share it. "She thought it was great." Simultaneously, she was "getting incredible pressure" from faculty in her department to turn in a proposal. She was perceived as "behind" the standard timeline. During the spring she began to write a proposal on this new topic with this new advisor. At this point, Jane describes abruptly deciding to leave school:

> Before I was quite finished with the proposal, I just decided I didn't want the whole thing. It was really weird. Its like, "I am going to get it all the way I want it to be." I am going to get my own dissertation topic, a good advisor, and

then, when it is all set, when all the ducks are in a row, I decide, I made the decision not to do it. .... I quit and I have never regretted it at all.

While she initially describes this as a sudden decision, Jane later tells me of the other resources she used to make her decision. She availed her self of services from two student services offices.

I also used Career Planning, to help decide if I should quit, actually. .... I just started talking with this woman, because I was starting to think about future careers, and between her and the Psychological Services person, I actually was the one who said, "I am just going to quit this thing." But I felt like they were there.

Jane recalls a conversation with her new advisor in which she broached the idea of leaving school. Jane's advisor was unconvinced by the story she advanced.

I made up a reason why I wanted to [go] — I said I wanted to take time off. "Because I want to go out and work for a women's organization" is what I said. And I don't think I even believed I was going to come back. .... She wasn't convinced. .... Well I was just sort of saying this because it sounded good. But I wanted out.

Her advisor also recommended withdrawing, rather than taking a leave of absence. Jane recalls that her advisor detailed some advantages to total withdrawal, but suspects that "she might have also heard in my voice that it didn't sound like I had any definite plan to come back." Jane also talked to other faculty. She depicts the chairman as "noncommittal" and says that the department made no "attempt to follow-up and find out what happened." Only one other faculty member offered her support. He told her that "it is the department's responsibility that they lost me." She suspects that his sympathy stemmed in part from "personal reasons," as he "was kind of kicked around the department too" because of a "tenure thing."

Furthermore, she felt cut off from other students, which was evidently painful. She relates her feelings:

This was the other bad thing. People, my friends in the department, didn't want to deal with this. Because they didn't want to hear about their colleague who was this high powered student starting to quit. I think it was a very bad time, .. they distanced themselves from me, and I probably distanced myself from them, because it is threatening. When everyone is struggling, it was a hard time in your dissertation process, and so I remember needing to talk to someone, and people just weren't around. .. I think it was too dark or whatever.

With hindsight, Jane acknowledges that if she had attended to her early ambivalent feelings, she might have "made the decision not do Art History any more, ... back in 1986 or 87 [before Atlantic]." Without regret, but with a tone of honest self-reflection she says:

I would have done all the work that I know have had to go through — soul searching — back then.

Flourishing in Academia

For Jane, her eroding interest and confidence in academia is ultimately the reason she left school. By probing her reasons for leaving, and her attitudes and experiences, I elicit Jane's opinions about how to flourish in academia. She also articulates her conclusion that she could not flourish in an academic environment.

Toward the end of our interview, Jane tries to summarize the main reasons why she left the department and an academic career. She lists "the advisor thing", "the car thing", and not having "a support network" as factors. "I don't know if I can say there is one overriding force" she tells me. She concludes "so I think it was a bigger thing about deciding not to dedicate myself to this field."

Jane's perceptions of the academic life were formed early. Her father is a professor who is now a dean. She describes him as a "person who is very personable and warm, friendly". She outlines the differences between her experiences and her views of academia.

> I think what it means to be a professor has changed over the time. I think it is publish or perish, whereas I really am a teacher-oriented type of person. .... I don't want to be sitting in a library doing research. I decided that wasn't me. .... I also decided Art History was too inwardly turned on itself for me. I wanted to do something more socially applicable. .... I decided I didn't want to be a professor and I didn't want the field. .... I don't know how much of what I feel about the Art History department is actually about academia and getting a Ph.D.

When I ask her what she knows now that she wishes she had known then, she highlights two things, the importance of a positive advisor relationship and a love of independent research.

> Now I can say, although I should have realized this, I think the advisor is, I don't know what the percent might be, 80% of the deal. If you get along really well, and that person is there to support you and you exchange ideas well, .. I think it can be the driving force. .... And I think that you have to have a love of being on your own and just digging. And I am really a people oriented person, and I start talking to the books, and they weren't talking back. It seems like something you should know, but I just didn't realize how intensely isolated it is.

Departmental Context

While the bare bones of the chronological story focus on academia and on her advisor, further probing reveals some deeply held negative attitudes towards her department. The departmental context has reshaped Jane's experiences with academia and led to her withdrawal.

Two years after she left, Jane still feels bitterness and disappointment with the department which emerge over and over in the interview, in comments like: "I could write a book" or "I can leave this university with a really good feeling after I talk to you" or "I can probably talk until tomorrow" At another point she comments dryly: "Let me put it this way: The Ombudsperson is very familiar with our department." When

asked to describe the department, she responds with one word, accompanied by sardonic laughter, "Hellacious."

When I ask for an example of faculty behavior which disillusioned her, she tells this story about her advisor. In her department, every faculty member reads and votes on every student's dissertation proposal. If the proposal garners a majority approval, it is passed. One student sat in the lobby of the department and heard the professor going from office to office, trying to persuade his colleagues not to sign off on his proposal. Overall, Jane summarizes her disappointment in the department with the comment:

> I am not so sure there is a lot of interest in graduate students there [the Art History Dept]. And that is a terrible thing to say.

I ask her where faculty interests lie instead. She responds:

> Their own research. I've even had a professor say to me, about undergrads, that she just wished they'd get out of her face basically, so she could do her work. I just don't think it is a very nurturing place. I don't know if any graduate program is. I just don't know. Its not just my own personal thing. .... I just see it as a really unhealthy place.

INTERPRETATION

In each case presented above, the story of leaving is much more complex than the literature would lead us to expect. It is not easy, nor ultimately desirable, to place them into neat categories. Rather, here I present four interpretive themes which emerge from these narratives.

Relation to concerns of policy makers

It is important to contrast these stories with the concerns raised in the policy literature. The most influential recent book about doctoral education is Bowen and Rudenstine's In Pursuit of the PhD (1992). One of the issues the authors raise is that of early versus late attrition. For their ten institution data set, they computed a 13% attrition rate before the second year, 18% between the beginning of the second year and achieving ABD status, and 13% during the dissertation years (p. 112).

Traditionally, early attrition is more acceptable than late attrition. High early attrition rates are often interpreted as a evidence of a healthy screening process. This argument holds that students leave school as a result of being sorted out in a rigorous department, in which only the most qualified students are certified. Bowen and Rudenstine describe early attrition as "both inevitable and desirable" (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992, p. 252).

Bowen and Rudenstine are particularly concerned with late attrition, in the ABD phase. They note that the rate of attrition in this third stage has increased in the last

twenty years, and is "grounds for serious concern" (p. 253). Late attrition is equated with waste and inefficiency (Stark, 1966, p. 13). Resources are wasted at several levels: individual faculty time and effort (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1973; Tucker et al., 1964), departmental resources (Cook & Swanson, 1978; Long, 1987), institutional resources (Tucker et al., 1964), state resources (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1990), and federal resources (Smith, 1985). These costs increase in cases of late attrition.

Sally is an example of an early attritor. From her perspective her attrition was certainly not "inevitable," as evidenced by her enrollment in another doctoral program. Sally left because of a rising disgust with the faculty, which in large measure stemmed from a sense of disconnectedness. She was unable to find a faculty member "that I could work with .... who would be interested in working with me." This parallels Tinto's opinion that the first year is marked by "development of personal affiliations with other students and faculty within the department" (Tinto, 1993, p. 235). Sally can also be classified under Bowen and Rudenstine's category of attrition during the first year which "reflects decisions by students that ... one particular graduate school was not a right choice" (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992, p. 252). However, neither of these statements capture the anger which Sally exudes, nor her sense that the misfit was the result of poor decision making, and chronic inattention on the part of the department. "They definitely framed it as an issue of .. something being wrong with the student for not fitting with the department."

A "healthy" kind of attrition described by Bowen and Rudenstine (p. 253) occurs when students determine that academia was the wrong life course for them or from a determination by the department that the student is unsuited for doctoral study. This describes Jane, although it took three years for her to reach this conclusion, rather than 6 months. While policy analysts might deplore the waste of resources, Jane speaks positively of the skills she acquired. "I don't regret it at all, because I have learned to think. And it became a part of my identity that I learned to be this pretty good thinker here. And that is big."

Students like Nathan, Bowen and Rudenstine would argue, need an active intervention, as they have proved their abilities, their persistence, and have already absorbed a large amount of resources. From Nathan's perspective, his story *is* one of success. The skills and connections of the university launched him on a successful career in his chosen specialty. The completion of the degree, while it would provide some "closure," does not have instrumental value for him at this point.

These student stories suggest that top-down definitions of success and failure, and points of policy intervention, need to be reassessed in the light of student perspectives. Nathan succinctly summarizes this dilemma by noting "I am not sure if the faculty

considers me a success or a failure." For himself, Nathan feels successful, and that graduate school contributed to that success. "I do a lot, I have been successful, ... and nobody doesn't respect me because I only have a masters degree and I am ABD .... I would not call it a tale of woe, by any means."

Perhaps it is time to rethink the questions of how success and failure are determined. Currently ours is a credential-based society, in which completion of a degree is accorded status. Nathan recognized that status, when he acknowledged feeling competitive with his wife in terms of who had more degrees. Perhaps universities are doing themselves and their students a disservice by categorizing attritors as failure. This suggests a vein of questions for future interviews, with students, faculty and administrators.

These stories also remind us of the limits of relying solely on statistical descriptions of student experiences. Jane and Nathan would be categorized similarly in the Bowen and Rudenstine trichotomy, and yet their accounts point to great differences in their experiences. While Bowen and Rudenstine acknowledge the complexity of individual experience, they use that very complexity as a justification for ignoring it. "It is much more sensible, in our view, to focus on when attrition occurs, which can be determined objectively" (p. 113).

Expectation for caring and a nurturing community

A second theme which emerged from these interviews was the importance of a caring advisor and a nurturing community. These students shared an implicit expectation that this would be part of the life of a doctoral student. In all three of the cases, when the student experienced care they were appreciative, and when it was not available they felt deprived.

Nathan had an excellent relationship with his advisor; for Nathan one strength of that relationship was that the professor was interested in all aspects of his life, and that their discussions ranged far and wide. This advisor spent extensive time with his students, and all of them reportedly liked him very much. "He formed a personal relationship with his students .... He knew you, he knew what your life was about .... He broke down the faculty-student wall." Jane was satisfied with her advisor during the period of time in which he was taking a deep interest in her professional growth and development, which she described as "just real looking-out-for-us kind of thing" and "he really makes opportunities appear for you." In her retrospective assessment of graduate school, she suggests that an advisor with whom "you get along real well" is "80% of the deal." Sally also explicitly articulated an expectation that advisors and faculty care about their students. Sally characterized a caring committed faculty as one

which shows an interest in students. "I don't need friends among the faculty, but it would be nice if somebody asked how you were doing." She also expects faculty to meet students half way. "When you went to ask for help on the statistics problem that they would happily give it to you and not tell you that they were busy and come back another time."

In this context the opposite of caring is indifference. Jane describes faculty indifference as "terrible" and equates the lack of nurturance with an "unhealthy" environment. Perhaps this inattention seems even worse because she *thought* that she had this initially, and because it is a trait she values in her father. Similarly, Sally's advisor was "happy to talk to me about courses," but uninterested in engaging in a deeper relationship; most students didn't "get a feeling of interest from the faculty."

This motif of student expectations for faculty is played out on three levels. As described, the students focus on the individual level issues; they have strong expectations for mentoring within the one-on-one student/advisor relationship. Nathan attributes the variation he experienced to differences in the personalities of his advisors. He simply "liked [his second advisor] much better as a person."

These expectations are also replicated at the departmental level in which group norms are enacted. The students express these qualities in terms of isolation versus community. Nathan describes an active and inclusive community, in which even new students are participants in research colloquia. Conversely, Sally describes a department in which she literally feels invisible, where no one knows her name and faculty are "mean". Jane contrasts an early period in which students socialized and studied with one another with her efforts at research. She characterizes the latter as a period of stark isolation: "I started talking to the books, and they weren't talking back." Sally also raises the issue of departmental politics. She describes a faculty absorbed by petty posturing and infighting. "There are these ridiculous things that go on in that department" This disputive atmosphere affected students. Sally was shocked to discover that doing high-quality work was insufficient for recognition. Instead, she had to engage in "impression management .... and work on my image in the department." Once again the students concur in appreciating a collegial, inclusive community, and condemning a contentious, isolating atmosphere.

Third, expectations for nurturance are extended to the academic profession as a whole. Sally and Jane both describe larger forces in higher education which impel faculty to act in an uncaring way. Sally says: "I really think there is this whole feeling in academia that it should be rough. It should be hard. And no graduate student should be happy. You should be poor, and you should slave." Although she asserts that is not an inevitable arrangement. Jane believes that the role of faculty members has changed

over time, with an over-emphasis on research, and an underemphasis on teaching and mentoring.

The theme of expectations can also be examined by looking at student perceptions of faculty expectations of students. Jane and Nathan both believe that faculty prefer students to be "focused", which can deprive students of the opportunity to explore their interests as they emerge over time. Sally sardonically commented that faculty wanted somebody to "be their slave," which evokes the conflict of interest faced by faculty who are both employers and mentors for students (Gumport & Jennings, 1993). Nathan and Sally both describe the importance to faculty of students whose interests are closely allied with their own. Jane and Sally, when asked which students were valued, responded "I don't think they value anybody." These comments may not accurately reflect faculty expectations. They may only reflect the perceptions of a particularly cynical sample of students. Future research might compare these perceptions to the stated expectations of faculty.

I speculate that there are two sources of conflicts between student expectations and the reality they experience. First, undergraduate education is a relatively centralized and formalized process. Graduate education is organizationally decentralized: the department is the locus of control for most aspects of doctoral education, including financial support, curricular requirements, and the dissertation process (Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Consequently, graduate educational process can seem idiosyncratic and chaotic, as the structures, values and processes differ by department both within and between universities. The change from the homogenous undergraduate context to the graduate education environment can be shocking to students.

The second source of conflict arises between historical notions of graduate education grounded in apprenticeship, and current strategies of weeding students out of graduate studies. The idea of doctoral education as a one-on-one mentorship implies a caring relationship, in which the professor trains and molds the student, until the student is ready to teach and research independently. Conversely, the process of rigorously sorting out students once they have begun their doctoral studies is competitive and political, as students seek to beat out their fellow students and curry favor with faculty. Thus it is no surprise that Nathan said this process was "not necessarily a good thing" and that Sally described starting school as "a huge shock."

Telling others about leaving

Another interesting similarity which emerges is that each of the students prevaricated in telling their departments why they were leaving[5]. Each student uses a different strategy. Jane is in the midst of the process of making sense of her decision to leave, thus she creates face-saving stories, by saying "I was just sort of saying this because it sounded good." I believe that she expected her rationalizations to be more palatable than a blunt announcement that she is renouncing the academic life. It is unclear to what extent she is trying to mislead the faculty, and to what extent she is still trying to fool herself. Jane recognizes the psychological complexity of her story: first she acknowledges that she could have done the "soul searching" at an earlier point, when she was also experiencing ambivalence, and second she suggests that having academic parent may have been an unexamined issue.

Nathan, on the other hand, tries to avoid the question by simply telling his department what they want to hear and what he wants to believe, at least initially. He describes responding to their written inquiries with a confident "yes its going well" which shifted to "maybe" and ultimately the acknowledgment, both to the department and to himself, that he would not finish his degree. Both Nathan and Jane were in a sense 'talking out loud' to their faculty, coming to terms with their decisions to leave while simultaneously testing this idea on the faculty. Sally, on the other hand, had reached a clear decision before sharing it with faculty. However, even when given an opportunity to vent her anger about the department, Sally opted to keep silent.

Sally and Jane had different experiences in sharing their decisions with fellow students. The distance of her fellow students meant that Jane did not share her confusion with them. This increased Jane's sense of isolation, as her student-colleagues were not emotionally available to her. Other students "distanced" themselves because the idea of a student dropping out was perceived as "threatening" and "too dark." Sally, on the other hand, was part a large group of students who were leaving, roughly a third of her cohort made the same decision she did. Sally says: "If it weren't for them I probably would have gone home." Her cohort stands in contrast to older students, some of whom made students feel unwelcome and "like you weren't up to par".

Sally and Jane also both relied on resources external to the department to help them reach their decisions. The Psychological Services Center was pivotal for both women, and Jane also used the Career Center. These were safe places in which to

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[5] Of course, I cannot be certain that the informants were completely honest with me, nor can I be certain that their understandings and explanations aren't applied post hoc. I am simply trusting the accounts offered, and working with them as presented.

explore their feelings about the department and academic profession because they were separated from the department.

These accounts illuminate some reasons so little is known about why students drop out of Ph.D. programs. Other students may be as reluctant as Jane to share their deep ambivalence about the academic life with the very faculty who have chosen this life. Others may behave like Sally, and employ silence as a strategic approach, especially in the face of questions perceived as ungenuine. "It wasn't an inquiring why." Other departments may behave like Nathan's and focus on *whether* a student is planning to return from a leave, not on *why* . The lack of information may be attributed both to the behavior of students and faculty.

Structure vs. Agency

The arena of graduate school seems to be a rich one for exploring issues of how students negotiate organizational structures. These stories are neither the story of independent human actors, nor of agentless people trapped in deterministic structures; instead, there is a dynamic interplay of structure and agency as each person negotiates their own path and decisions. Nor can attrition be seen as a discrete event, but rather, it is clearly a dynamic process, with antecedents, which, for some, can be traced to expectations and goals formulated before enrolling.

Doctoral students are people who have generally succeeded at school. For some, choosing to leave graduate can feel like the ultimate defeat by a system in which a student has always been successful. The students in these interviews describe three different strategies which can be interpreted as the reclamation of agency.

Sally employs silence as a viable political strategy. She chooses not to switch advisors for fear of angering the woman who dressed her down. She also adopted silence in the face of formal processes designed to elicit why students were leaving. She sees silence as less dangerous to her future career than speaking out. This may be interpreted as an assertion of self and preservation of self in the face of disempowerment.

Jane creates a viable life in a system she then rejects completely. After a series of blows, most notably being abandoned by her advisor, she struggles back to get "the ducks in a row." Once she is on track, and is for the first time in a position of being confident that she could finish her degree, she reevaluates her decision to pursue the academic life. While this might seem inexplicable, it is, understandable for someone who is used to accomplishing what she undertakes. By not dropping out until she herself is convinced that she can do the necessary work, she is asserting her mastery of the process.

Assigning responsibility is a third strategy for seizing agency and restoring self esteem. At first Sally internalized her anguish. She burst into tears, talked to her friends, talked to other faculty, sought counseling, and ultimately held another research job before concluding that she "totally" thinks it was fault of the department, not any deficiency in herself. More specifically, she points a finger at the admissions process, which she portrays as based on the faulty assumption that students "will know not to come here" if their interests don't match those of faculty. Not only do faculty assume students will take a consumerist view of their educational choices, but Sally describes them as deliberately misleading students who seek them out: "They will say whatever it takes to get you to come there." On the other hand, Nathan takes full responsibility for his decision, chalking any sense of regret up to his youth. "You try to grab hold, when you are young and foolish."

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented the narrative accounts of three students who dropped out of doctoral programs. By presenting the words of the students, and interpreting their narrative accounts along four analytic themes, this paper has begun to fill the four gaps in existing research identified at the outset of the paper.

First, by focusing on the departmental context, the accounts of the students moved beyond an analysis of the individual attributes of the attriting students. These students identified a variety of contextual features as salient, such as departmental relationships (between faculty and students, among faculty, and among students) and departmental policies (graduate education predicated on weeding out students). Nonetheless, each student takes responsibility for their choice, both affirming their decision to attend school and the decision to leave it. Thus the second gap is addressed, as we have been able to glimpse some of the ways in which organizational and individual factors interact.

Third, this paper has begun the process of incorporating student voices into the research on doctoral student attrition. And fourth, by presenting a contextualized chronology of each students experience, the complexity of the process begins to emerge. In particular, it is possible to see the value of reconceptualizing attrition as the consequence of a process, rather than an isolated event in and of itself.

This paper has also helped to identify some directions for future research. By analyzing the accounts relative to the policy literature, I identified a potential disjuncture in the definitions of success held by students and that which is held by policy makers and institutions. Interviews with students, faculty and administrators

could help to illuminate possible differences in criteria for definitions of success, and help schools to evaluate if the status quo is the most desirable position.

The analysis of student expectations, in particular their expectations for a caring community, leads to questions about possible contradictions between the expectations of students and faculty. In addition, it will be valuable to compare the perceptions students have of faculty expectations and the articulated expectations of faculty.

The analysis of how students told their departments they were leaving raised questions of how accurate information is conveyed from disgruntled students to faculty. Not only do faculty and departments need to assess if they want to or actually do ask 'genuinely inquiring why questions,' but it is important to understand under what circumstances students communicate forthrightly with their departments.

Finally, the analysis of issues related to structure and agency suggests that future research focus on the key contextual factors which shape student experiences. Other literature on dissatisfaction and on leaving in other context might help illuminate the choices made by students.

Note

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